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Parent Abuse: The Abuse of Parents by Their Teenage Children

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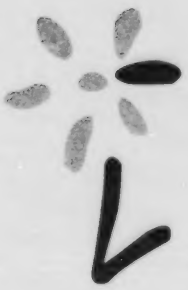

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Parent Abuse: The Abuse of Parents by Their Teenage Children
was prepared by **Barbara Cottrell** for the Family Violence Prevention Unit, Health Canada.

Également en français sous le titre *Violence à l'égard des parents : les mauvais traitements infligés aux parents par leurs adolescents*

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Anne-Marie Ambert, a professor at York University, whose books on parenting include *The Effect of Children on Parents* and *Parents, Children, and Adolescents: Interactive Relationships and Development in Context.*

Jackie Barkley, a clinical therapist with Choices Adolescent Treatment Program, Central Regional Health Board, author of "Reclaiming Our Children: Teachers as Elders" in *Daily Meaning: Counternarratives of Teachers' Work* and "The Politics of Parenting and the Youth Crisis" in *Power and Resistance: Critical Thinking About Canadian Social Issues.*

Peter Monk, a child and family therapist who conducted research on the topic in British Columbia. His study is titled *Adolescent-to-Parent Violence: A Qualitative Analysis of Emerging Themes* (Unpublished thesis.)

Jerome Price, who works with teens and their families at the Michigan Family Institute and is author of *Power and Compassion: Working with Difficult Adolescents and Abused Parents.*

The project was funded by the Family Violence Prevention Division of Health Canada and my thanks go to Liette Lalonde for her support of this work.

Introduction

Twenty years ago, people thought spousal abuse was a rare occurrence. Victims were blamed with statements such as "she must like it or why would she stay?" and "she probably provoked him." Abuse was seen as a private family matter and there were few supports available. Since the issue of violence within families has come to public attention, policies and supports have been put in place and attempts are being made to protect adults from abusive spouses and children from abusive parents.

Another form of family violence that may occur as often but is still a well-kept secret is the *abuse of parents by their adolescent children.*

There are striking similarities between current attitudes toward parent abuse and the old attitudes toward wife abuse. Parents are usually the first people blamed for the behaviour of their children, but there are few supports and interventions available to them. There is also little public awareness of parent abuse.

To determine the nature and parameters of parent abuse, initial research was conducted in 1995–96 in Halifax, Nova Scotia by Barbara Cottrell and Mary Anne Finlayson of Meta Research and Communications. The project was sponsored by the Captain William Spry Community Centre, the Committee Against Woman Abuse and the Family Service Association of the Halifax Regional Municipality, and was funded by Health Canada.

We talked to parents, professionals and adolescents in group discussions and in formal and informal individual interviews. We listened to 45 parents who had experienced parent abuse; 39 teenagers; 34 community workers, clinicians, academics and other professionals. A number of people interviewed self-identified as both a professional and a parent of an abusive teen.

Some of the questions we attempted to answer were:

- What is parent abuse?
- How widespread is parent abuse?
- Who is the abuser?
- Who is being abused?
- How is the family affected?
- Why is the abuse happening?
- Where can families get help?

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We also researched the literature and found a huge void on the topic of the abuse of parents by their teenage children. A 1993 literature review prepared for the Family Violence Prevention Division of Health Canada (*Four Variations of Family Violence: A Review of Sociological Research*, 1993: 8) states that the substantial body of data on family violence includes little reliable information on forms of violence other than spousal abuse. It warns that "(M)any young people ... physically victimize their parents. Again, this is a problem that has been, by and large, ignored by Canadian researchers." Little has been published on the topic since then, yet counsellors, social workers and other professionals continue to hear from clients more and more anecdotal evidence of this form of family violence.

A pamphlet, guide and final report documented the research findings.

Follow-up research

At the request of Health Canada, 25 interviews were conducted in 1999 to determine how useful the 1996 materials were. Fifteen people who had requested the materials talked about how they accessed and used the materials, and 10 parents of abusive adolescents discussed their experiences and how these related to the information in the materials. Both parents and professionals were extremely positive about the materials. They found the work "an eye-opener" and said it accurately described their experiences.

Most people we spoke to said they had not seen the issue discussed anywhere other than in *Parent Abuse*, and they were glad to see the topic "out in the open." Parents said that it helped them identify their experiences as abuse. They also said it helped them take action.

> ***It helps you look at (the teen's) behaviour in a different way and to realize that it's not right for our children to act like this and it's not something we should put up with.***
>
> **(A parent)**
>
> ***The publication is water in the desert. It names the issue. By calling it parent abuse, it defines a reality. Having the concept out there helps parents recognize the behaviour is inappropriate. Gloria Steinem said that: before we really named it "wife assault", we called it "life." The issue of parent abuse is still at that stage.***
>
> **(A social worker)**

This publication is an updated version of the 1996 publication.

What is Parent Abuse?

Defining Parent Abuse

> ***Children are not adults. They are dependent, vulnerable persons, requiring protection and leadership. The relationship between parents and children is not equal: it is a protective, unequal relationship of an adult with a dependent child. The relative balance between dependence and independence is not static and changes with the age of the child, but essentially equality is not achieved until adulthood. In a positive parent–child relationship, the parent has accountability and responsibility to provide reasonable authority over the child. The relationship is dysfunctional when the reverse is true, and carries with it the potential for abuse.***
>
> **(Jacqueline Barkley, in a talk to parents, 1999)**

Occasional conflict between people who live together, including parents and their children, is normal. Parent abuse is difficult to define because it is not always clear when certain behaviours are "normal" and when they are "abusive." Conflict becomes abusive when one person uses threats, force or manipulation to gain power over the other. Parent abuse is any act of a child that is intended to cause physical, psychological or financial damage to gain power and control over a parent.

Teenagers normally go through a process of trying to establish their sense of separateness from their parents. This is called "individuating," and may at times include some defiance or resistance toward authority. There is a difference, however, between resistance and aggression, between separating from a parent and trying to take control of a parent, between "normal" teenage behaviour and "*parent abuse.*"

Abusive adolescent behaviour ranges from mild to severe violence. Parents have to examine their teen's behaviour and determine whether it is acceptable or if it has become abusive. Abusive behaviour should not be tolerated.

The abuse usually begins with verbal abuse. For most parents, the abuse is a daily occurrence that follows a pattern, usually with the child showing no signs of remorse or guilt.

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> *There was no remorse, he felt totally justified in his behaviour.*
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Some parents, however, reported a cycle of abuse similar to spousal abuse, where the child expresses remorse, and sometimes self-hatred. Even when abusive teens do not express remorse, many parents sense that the teens are aware that their behaviour is hurtful. Some parents report that teens who abuse drugs or alcohol exhibit a frightening lack of emotion concerning their abuse.

Forms of Abuse

Any behaviour that is deliberately harmful to the parent and used as a form of control may be defined as abuse. The abuse may be physical, psychological (including verbal) or financial. Most abuse can be classified in more than one way. Here are some examples of the various forms of abuse:

Physical abuse

- hitting, punching, slapping or kicking
- shoving and pushing
- breaking things
- punching holes in the walls
- throwing things
- spitting

Parents' accounts of the physical abuse they experience at the hands of their teens are graphic and frightening:

> ***He pushed me against the door and I slid down. He punched me two times in the leg and left.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Teens can display aggression that leaves the parent with the unmistakable message: "If I can do this to a wall, I can do it to you. I'm in control here."

Psychological abuse and emotional terrorism

- intimidating the parent, making the parent fearful
- maliciously playing mind games, trying to make the parent think he or she is crazy
- making unrealistic demands on parents, such as insisting they drop what they're doing to comply with the child's demands

- purposely not telling the parent where they're going or what they're doing
- running away from home or staying out all night
- lying
- threatening to hurt, maim or kill the parent or someone else
- making manipulative threats, such as threatening to run away, commit suicide or otherwise hurt themselves without really intending to do so
- degrading the parent or other family members
- withholding affection
- controlling the running of the household

> *I thought he would punch me in the face. He was really wild and it frightened me.*
>
> (A parent)

Verbal abuse is one form of psychological abuse. This includes:

- yelling
- arguing, challenging ("I don't have to do anything you say!")
- being sarcastic or critical, belittling
- laughing in the parent's face
- name calling ("You bitch!")
- "I hate you!"
- swearing at the parent

Some adolescent behaviour is more irresponsible and thoughtless than abusive. However, in some cases, adolescents deliberately use psychological means to manipulate, control and hurt their parents. This teen was fully aware of the impact of his behaviour:

> *I used to play mind games with my parents, but I never hit them. I'd do little things to upset them, to get them going. Like I'd take the batteries out of the TV and VCR remote control and hide them, then watch my father go nuts trying to change the channel. Or, I'd lock up a little box in my room and put it under the bed, but leave a corner sticking out, like I'd meant to hide it. There'd be nothing in it, but it would drive my parents crazy thinking I had dope or something in my room.*
>
> (17-year-old male)

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Financial abuse

- stealing money or parent's belongings (sometimes referred to as "borrowing" without permission)
- selling possessions, their own or the parents'
- destroying the home or parents' belongings
- demanding parents buy things they don't feel they can afford
- incurring debts the parents must cover (e.g. as a result of damage to or theft of others' property)

Parents face tremendous ongoing pressure from the culturally pervasive idea that they should provide their children with material possessions. While most teens try to persuade their parents to provide them with the latest in brand-name goods, some abusive teens capitalize on their parents' feelings of obligation and inadequacy by attempting to force them to spend far more than they can afford:

> ***You can't reason with her. If she wants something that I can't afford, I explain it to her and she says "I don't want to hear this." She thinks everything's my fault. I even took out a bank loan because she wanted a whole new bedroom suite, but it's never enough, she always wants more.***
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How Widespread is Parent Abuse?

Many professionals believe that parent abuse is increasing in our society. Few statistics are available to support or contradict this belief. Police records do not specify the relationship between the victim and perpetrator in charges of assault, and the *Young Offenders' Act* prevents access to information on charges against minors. Hospitals, shelters and other institutions such as child welfare and adolescent mental health agencies and schools, where we would expect to hear reports of parent abuse, often do not recognize, record or report the problem.

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Who is Likely to be Violent?

Profile of the Teen

Gender

Although many professionals believe that boys tend to be more physically violent toward their parents than girls, our research indicates that both boys and girls participate in all forms of abuse.

Age and size

Professionals believe that the foundation of abusive behaviour begins long before the children are teenagers. Most of the parents we interviewed said the abuse began when the child was between 12 and 14. Some parents were aware that their children exhibited signs of violent behaviour at an earlier age (four or five years) but initially viewed the behaviour as a "tantrum" rather than abuse. Teenagers' greater physical size may make them more threatening, and parents then begin to identify the child's behaviour as abusive.

Substance abuse and criminal activity

Many abusive teens participate in socially deviant activities such as drug or alcohol use or criminal activities (shoplifting, fraud, break and enter, theft, violent crime and/or prostitution). When teens become involved in drugs or alcohol, parents sometimes notice a sudden, drastic change in their school work, relationships and behaviour.

Victims and perpetrators

Sometimes youth who are abusive toward their parents have themselves been the victims of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse. This may have occurred within their nuclear or extended family, or outside the family altogether. Some teens are not the direct victims of violence but may have witnessed it in their homes. It is recognized that children who witness violence are at a greater risk of developing behaviour problems, such as aggression with peers, non-compliance with adults, destructive behaviour, and conflict with the law.

Who is Being Abused?

Profile of the Family

Family structure

Because families experience changes in structure and income, it is difficult to describe the typical abused parent as single or married, wealthy or poor. The majority (76%) of the parents in the 1996 study had single-parented during their lives. (The study was not based on a random sample, so this proportion may not represent the family composition distribution in which teens abuse their parents.) Parent abuse occurs in families from various races, social classes and family structures. Our study included adopted children, step-children, foster children and biological children, and while the majority of those interviewed were single parents at the time of the interview, the problem also occurs in two-parent families.

Age

The average age of parents we interviewed in the 1996 study was 44 years. This contradicts the popular belief that parent abuse is experienced primarily by people who became parents at too young an age.

Mothers

Mothers and step-mothers, in both single and two-parent homes, are the most common targets of teenagers' abusive behaviour. Many mothers are intimidated by their son's and daughter's physical size and greater strength, although mothers who are physically larger than their teen also experience abuse. Mothers seem less able than fathers to take a stand and give their teenager an ultimatum to follow the rules or leave the house and often protect their children even when the children are victimizing them.

Fathers

Fathers and step-fathers are also victims of parent abuse but generally not to the same extent as mothers and step-mothers. When violence occurs between children and their fathers, fathers often react violently and perceive the incident as a fight rather than abuse.

Parents with disabilities

Parents with disabilities, including fathers, are also frequent victims.

Other vulnerable targets

Some teens also abuse other vulnerable members of the family such as younger siblings or family pets.

As with other forms of family violence, it seems that abusers victimize the people they see as vulnerable.

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What is the Effect on the Family?

The Parents

Denial

All abused parents experience a range of emotions, from fear of their teenager and fear for the safety of their teenager, to guilt about pressing police charges for assault. Most parents have difficulty accepting that their child could be abusive toward them and may initially deny the problem:

> ***He's my kid. You make excuses, you don't see it for what it is.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Failure, shame and blame

Many parents feel depressed and filled with shame that they were not able to produce a happy family. They question their parenting abilities, agonize over where they went wrong, and begin to feel like failures. Women particularly live under the threat of not meeting societal expectations and being condemned as bad mothers. One mother said:

> ***I feel punished. It's like all the mistakes I made in parenting have come back to haunt me.***
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In this society we do not collectively take responsibility for our children. While parents certainly play a major role in their child's development, they are usually blamed for everything that goes wrong. They, along with everyone else, buy into this belief and often take full responsibility for their abusive child's actions.

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Ambert challenges this narrow perspective of the parent–child relationship:

> *[The] public still sees parents as the prime, and often only, influence on their children. Even if they perceive that peers can be very important, they still feel that, if their adolescents suffer from the effect of the detrimental influence of their peer group, the negative consequences are still the parents' fault.*
>
> (1992: 3)

Challenging the belief that parents are the sole influence on their children can be a refreshing perspective for parents, especially those struggling with guilt and shame over the actions of their children. The idea that parents are the sole influence on their children negates the effect of other social influences in the child's life and places an impossible load of responsibility on the parents' shoulders. When they seek help they frequently encounter messages of blame. This feeling of being blamed and the sense of being solely responsible sometimes makes it difficult for parents to hear positive and useful suggestions to change their behaviour as a possible solution to difficulties with their children:

> *It is so hard to ask for help because you don't want to define yourself as a failure. You don't want to admit you didn't succeed with this child.*
>
> (A parent)
>
> *All adults are parenting the next generation, and community members of all kinds, including neighbours, relatives, teachers, ministers, social workers and the police, all share responsibility for what happens to our children.*
>
> (Jacqueline Barkley, in a talk to parents, 1999)

Despair and isolation

In addition to feeling solely responsible, parents often feel unsupported and isolated. They feel hopeless and helpless because they are unable to control the situation, either because of physical danger or their own emotional turmoil. Despair at not having a harmonious family life and feeling isolated in the situation makes change all the more difficult. The psychological abuse parents

experience is as unnerving and soul destroying as physical abuse. As Jerome Price, in his book *Power and Compassion: Working with Difficult Adolescents and Abused Parents*, says:

> *The greatest roadblock to change is the hopelessness that abused parents feel and the inertia that results from their despair. Parents of aggressive adolescents appear to be either paralyzed into an emotionless stupor or activated to perform a set of ritualized reactions in which they helplessly rage against the tyranny of their children.*
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> (1996: 76)

Strained relations

Teens' abusive behaviour often leads to arguments between adults in the home as to how the teen should be disciplined. This limits the amount of quality time the adults are able to spend together. Many couples' relationships undergo a tremendous amount of strain and are sometimes torn apart because of the teen's behaviour:

> *It drove a wedge between my wife and me. I had to decide between being a father to my children or a husband to my wife. It was impossible to see my child as the culprit – she was always quiet and docile when I came home, and it was my wife who was "freaking out."*
>
> (A parent)

Trust

Almost all abused parents feel unable to trust their teen, especially when they are left unsupervised at home. The uncertainty of what will confront them when they return is always on the parents' mind. Some wonder whether the child will be home at all, or if their home and possessions will be damaged, while others just dread having to deal with their teen:

> *It was so bad I'd be glad to go to work and I'd dread coming home. My first fear was she wouldn't be home, my second was that she would be home. I'd go home on the bus worrying about what she'd do to hurt me tonight.*
>
> (A parent)

Ambert challenges this narrow perspective of the parent–child relationship:

> *[The] public still sees parents as the prime, and often only, influence on their children. Even if they perceive that peers can be very important, they still feel that, if their adolescents suffer from the effect of the detrimental influence of their peer group, the negative consequences are still the parents' fault.*
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Health

The stress of dealing with an abusive teen can have a negative impact on parents' health, sometimes making existing health problems worse, sometimes causing new problems. A number of parents told us that they use prescribed medication to help them deal with the tension and stress of the situation. Some parents also turn to alcohol or drugs to help them cope.

Loss

When the teenager has had to leave the house, some family members experience a strong sense of loss: siblings no longer have their brother or sister, and parents grieve for the loss of their child. They are also grieving for the loss of the family as a unit. This experience is especially traumatic in single-parent families where the teen is an only child. In cases where the teenager has a child, parents lose not only their child, but also their contact with the grandchild.

Siblings

Adolescents' abusive behaviour affects other children in the home and parents fear for their safety. Some parents are concerned that observing a sibling's dangerous activities (drugs, alcohol, prostitution) may affect the other children and put the rest of the family at risk. In addition, focussing on the abusive teen often leaves little time and energy for parents to pay attention to the other children. Parents reported that the children who are being ignored sometimes act out in order to get attention, or become depressed.

Other relationships

The parents' and child's relationships with friends and extended family members can be jeopardized by the abuse. Teens also manipulate other family members into believing the abuse is the parents' fault:

> ***She'd tell her father I'd done things to her, call my sister and mother and tell them all things I hadn't even done. She slowly eroded my relationship with my mother.***
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The workplace

The stress of dealing with the abuse spreads beyond the home. Parents take their concerns and anxiety with them to the workplace.

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The worry experienced by parents whose teenagers are skipping school, or who have run away from home, can make it difficult for them to concentrate at work. Their concern about the child's whereabouts, whether the child is in trouble or in danger, can lead to anxiety about their jobs and even about the security of their job.

Some parents also worry about the number of phone calls they receive at work concerning their teenager, as well as the amount of time they have to take off to deal with emergency situations or court appearances. The cost of counselling the family when public services are inadequate or unavailable can cause an added financial strain that makes it even more imperative that parents keep their jobs.

Why is the Abuse Happening?

There is no definitive explanation for parent abuse; there are, in fact, a multitude of interconnected dynamics contributing to the behaviour. However, several contributing factors have been identified.

Family Dynamics

Parental authority

There is a need for clear structure and leadership in families. Parents need to know how to be in charge, to realize they have the right to set limits, and to say, "This is my house and you can't behave that way in it." They are sometimes afraid of losing the love of their teen by enforcing rules and standards of behaviour. Sometimes parents are so intimidated they try to avoid confrontation by allowing the adolescent to rule the household.

When teens feel their parents are not in control, they act out because they don't feel safe. The developmental tasks of adolescents are typically complex and can be difficult. For most teenagers, it is an added burden to cope with power over their parents.

Enforcing the rules

It is normal for adolescents to go through a period of "I hate your rules," but the parents' job is to rein the children in tighter and impose the rules. Sometimes parents' attempts to enforce house rules are successful. However, some children become even more abusive and refuse to obey the rules when their parents make it clear that the teen's behaviour is not acceptable, and they impose appropriate consequences.

> ***Now my daughter decides she's not going to follow the rules around curfews or helping with housework. I don't think those rules were unreasonable.***
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Changes in the family structure

In situations in which parents have separated, the children sometimes resent the parent they live with (usually the mother) for changing their home, community, school, friends or lifestyle. Teenagers are sometimes jealous of the loss of attention from their mother or father when new partners become involved. When the mother is a single parent, teens sometimes vent all their anger and frustration on her simply because she is present. One teen, when asked why she abuses her mother, said "Because I have no one else."

Social isolation

Feelings of isolation and alienation from families, schools and society can be experienced by teenagers in North American culture. Feelings of disconnection do not lead most adolescents to act abusively, and are not the sole basis of violent teenage behaviour, but there may be a link between this isolation and teenage aggression.

Modern-day pressures of work and finances create additional stress and problems for the family and leave parents with little time to spend with their teens. When children are younger, parents take the responsibility of planning their activities, but when they begin to reach adolescence this becomes increasingly more difficult.

Teens who feel alienated from their parents often crave for their attention and will often act out abusively as a means of expressing their frustration and anger. Further, adolescents may lack the maturity to exercise self-control, and this can lead to other forms of socially deviant behaviour. These teens need adult guidance and leadership.

History of Abuse

In our society, violence and aggression are commonly used to achieve goals and maintain control. Parents shout at their children, the police pepper spray protesters, and Hollywood's good guys shoot and kill to save the world. Aggression and violent images invade most corners of our lives. In some families or communities, physical, emotional or verbal abuse is an accepted method of communication. If it has been occurring for years or generations, it may have become customary behaviour.

Some abusive teens have themselves been the victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or have witnessed their parents or siblings being abused and may become abusive as a way to regain some of their lost power and control. According to Shuman and Seiffge-Krenke:

> ***Many studies have provided evidence to support the hypothesis that adolescent violent behaviour is a function of having experienced or witnessed child abuse. Wisdom (1989) reviewed the findings of such studies and determined that boys exhibiting violent behaviors were more likely to have experienced abuse or witnessed extreme physical abuse than non-violent boys.***
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Unfortunately, the teens who respond with abuse often do not focus their retaliation on the perpetrator – instead they abuse their non-abusive parent.

Shuman and Seiffge-Krenke also state that boys, more than girls, tend to identify with their fathers and are likely to possess their fathers' negative and positive traits. This has serious implications for boys who have witnessed their fathers' abusive behaviour toward their mothers. In this 1984 study,[1] it was found that 23% of the fathers of violent youths had battered their wives. The authors conclude that "a combination of paternal aggression, inadequate discipline and negative attitude toward the child fosters aggressive and delinquent behaviour" (1997: 181).

Sex role stereotyping and violence against women

The continued devaluation of women means that women still earn less money than men and are under-represented in positions of power. As the victims of ongoing violence and denigration, many women lack confidence in themselves as human beings and as parents. Yet, women are still primarily responsible for parenting our children. Although many fathers are equally concerned about their abusive children and share responsibility in seeking help for the problem, some are emotionally or physically absent, or abusive.

[1] Cited in Shulman, Shmuel and Inge Seiffge-Krenge. Fathers and Adolescents: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives. London and New York: Routledge. 1997.

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In the past few decades, an increase in aggressive behaviour among teenage girls has been observed. Some people have suggested that young women today are rebelling against the traditional concept that "girls are timid, passive and fearful." Many young women want to be powerful and recognized and their anger can sometimes be understood as justified and constructive, a response to social injustice and dominance. However, their anger is sometimes unjustified and inappropriately expressed.

Some professionals report that girls express hatred toward their mothers for being submissive, and for subjecting themselves and their children to the violence of their husband or partner. These girls are wary of the passivity and abusively, often imitating the aggressive behaviour of males. One mother reports that her teenage daughter contemptuously yelled at her, "You're nothing but a coward!" Strategies such as submission, which women use to cope with abuse, often lead to further victimization.

Traditionally, women have been aware of and been receptive to the feelings and emotions of those around them. In our interviews, many teens agreed that it was easier to share their emotions with their mothers. They're not as afraid of their mothers as they are of their fathers, who have been socialized to respond to teens' feelings more aggressively. Teens said things like, "I'd never dare hit my Dad." As a result, adolescents can express a whole range of feelings toward their mothers, including anger.

> *You can get over a fight with your mom quicker than with anyone else. If you fight with a friend, you don't talk for a long time. Teens take their parents for granted. They take out their aggression on their parents because parents will forgive them.*
>
> **(A 15-year-old teen)**

The Role of Schools

Youth are under a great deal of pressure from schools and from their peers. The school environment can be violent, unsafe and disrespectful. Teens experience violence and the threat of violence at the hands of other students. The threat of violence and the pressure to be "cool" at school makes many teens feel vulnerable and lowers their self-esteem. They feel they have to be in control to avoid being victimized and learn not to show weakness in front of their peers. Teachers often feel as powerless as any other adult to deal with teens' aggression.

> ***School is really violent and abusive. You should hear the way the kids talk, they say, "Don't mess with me" and they mean it. My friend was walking along one day and some guy comes up to him and says, "Where's that $20 you owe me?" If you're half-ways nervous, if you're not a cool person, you'd have to get the money for him even if you never borrowed it, otherwise you live in fear of being beaten up.***
>
> (A teenager)

There are few outlets for adolescents to deal with the stress they experience at school, and many teens act out their victimization and rage in severely violent ways at home. Parents who are being abused reported rarely feeling supported or helped by the schools their children attend. While every situation must be assessed on its own merits, as this parent says, communication with the school is essential.

> ***Parents need to stay connected to the school. The school needs to know that there is a family for these kids, the school will be less likely to see the parents as the cause, and it will keep them from simply expelling the kids, and will help the situation.***
>
> (A social worker)

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol and drug abuse is commonly linked with teenagers' violent behaviour. According to a 1994 survey,[2] use of illicit drugs is primarily a teenage phenomenon. The highest use of cannabis was reported by males age 15-24 (26%–28%). It was estimated that in the 15 to 17 age group, 27% of males use cannabis; 31% have used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; and 27% of males use at least one illicit drug. The statistics for young women are only slightly lower: 24% of females in the 15 to 17 age group use cannabis; 29% have used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; and 24% use at least one illicit drug.

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A series of surveys on Canadian youth aged 11, 13 and 15[3] has found that, since 1994, there has been a sharp increase in youth who by Grade 10 had used marijuana three or more times. According to the report, in 1994 30% of boys and 27% of girls used marijuana. In 1998, this had risen to 44% of boys and 41% of girls. There is also a slight increase in the adolescent use of solvents. In 1994, 7% of boys and 5% of girls were users; in 1998: 9% of boys and 6% of girls. Cocaine use also rose slightly, from 3% to 6% for boys, and 3% to 5% for girls.

The report concludes that, since the 1994 survey, there has been a strong relationship between use of marijuana and other health-risk behaviour, and those who use marijuana are also more likely to use alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and spend a great deal of time with other adolescents who engage in the same behaviour. They're more likely to feel pressured at school, skip classes and bully others.

Although substance abuse does not cause violent behaviour, parents report that when their teen is using drugs, their behaviour is more severe and the teen shows no sense of remorse.

> ***Her anger was much worse when she was on drugs. There was a cutting edge to her. There was no feeling. The drugs wiped out all her feelings.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Price (1996) notes that drug abuse is often perceived as the cause of a child's problematic behaviour and cautions that drug abuse, moodiness and dropping grades are often symptoms of other serious problems.

Substance abuse by parents can contribute to the problem of parent abuse. Teenagers may be angry with their parents for being unavailable and emotionally abandoning them, and may attempt to control the parents by threatening to reveal their substance abuse.

[3] Health Behaviours in School Aged Children (HBSC) surveys. Conducted in Canada in 1989-90; 1993-94; and 1997-98. These surveys are administered every four years to a representative sample of youth (11, 13 & 15 years of age) in participating countries. In the 1998 survey, 28 countries participated. The report summarizes trends in the health of Canadian youth over three surveys between 1990 and 1998.

Mental Health and Medical Issues

Serious mental disorders

In some rare instances, adolescent violence is a symptom of a serious mental disorder, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, these disorders are often difficult to diagnose.

> *I dragged myself and him around to every specialist and expert trying to get help. I was told I was over-controlling or under-controlling. Their main message was I should tighten the boundaries. I went to a number of very good people in this city, but they all missed the point. After years of hell he was diagnosed as schizophrenic.*
>
> (A parent)

Although such a serious diagnosis may explain some behaviour, Price cautions:

> *The greatest roadblock to change is the hopelessness that abused parents feel and the inertia that results from their despair. Parents of aggressive adolescents appear to be either paralyzed into an emotionless stupor or activated to perform a set of ritualized reactions in which they helplessly rage against the tyranny of their children.*
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Price also cautions that parents should not let labels or diagnoses frighten them into believing they cannot expect to be treated respectfully by their children.

However, until mentally ill children are properly diagnosed, parents struggle to understand their behaviour.

> *I thought he was being manipulative, but now I realize he was in a state of psychosis. I was full of anger and blamed him, but he had to get practically sick unto death before he could get help from professionals. These young men are not stupid or evil. They are very alone and are very difficult people to deal with.*
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Not all mental health professionals address the child's abusive behaviour toward the parents.

> *We worked with one psychiatrist who did not in any way address the abuse issues... We repeatedly brought up the issue of violence because it was escalating. As the violence continued to worsen, I was told to call the police and the situation was never looked at comprehensively and in depth. Not only do they not get it, but they make it worse. We started working with another psychiatrist, but she didn't address the abuse issues either. At that point my daughter was locking me in closets, putting her fists through walls and raging on a daily basis. And that went on for a year and a half.*
>
> **(A parent)**

Medical diagnoses give parents relief from guilt and blame, and the prescribed medications often help control aggressive behaviours. While a diagnosis brings some relief, it can also harness the parent to caring for a mentally ill child for life. After an adolescent is diagnosed, parents need support.

> *Parents also need to know what they are dealing with. They need to know that if their child has a severe mental illness like schizophrenia, they are isolated and withdrawn and suffer from terrible loneliness.*
>
> **(A parent)**

Less serious mental disorders

Some teens who exhibit violent or aggressive behaviour toward their parents or others are diagnosed as having:

- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD or ADD)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder
- Conduct Disorders, including Adolescent Adjustment Disorder.

While these diagnoses identify a problem, some parents and professionals believe that doctors do little more than label the symptoms and prescribe medication where they deem it appropriate. Parents and professionals are concerned about widespread prescription drug use among teens, and with the impact of labelling a child. Some parents believe that this labelling is used to excuse certain behaviours and this creates further problems:

> ***She possibly had a mental illness or emotional problem, but that's not the issue; it's not an excuse. It was her behaviour we needed to look at.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Parenting practices

We are a generation who put our energy into making teens happy and comfortable instead of responsible. We have attempted to change the role of the parent from authoritative disciplinarian to partners in a more equal relationship in which parents are "friends" with their children. The result is that children develop images of parents as the people whose job it is to make them happy.

Sometimes, this results in inappropriate and unhealthy parent–child relationships in which parents treat their children as companions or partners. This places an unfair burden on the teen.

> ***We wanted to be the kids' friends, but we now realize that we have to be their parents; they have lots of friends out there.***
>
> **(A parent)**

In the first half of the 19th century, children were considered the property of adults. They were expected to "be seen and not heard," and were often treated disrespectfully, sometimes cruelly, by adults both at home and in school. Children had few rights and parents were seldom held responsible for harming their children. The permissive 1960s and the work to end child abuse changed much of that. While few dispute that children's rights must be recognized, attempts to protect these rights have led to a severe crisis in leadership within families.

Not all mental health professionals address the child's abusive behaviour toward the parents.

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The "new ethics in child rearing" that began in the 1960s shifted focus away from the need for structure and leadership within the family in an attempt to recognize children's basic need to have their feelings and opinions valued. Kindness, leniency and an emphasis on the importance of a child's free expression of feelings became the central themes of positive parenting.

> ***The rule that has come to dominate today's theories of child rearing is that parents must be lenient.***
>
> **(Price, 1996: 18)**

Price lists familiar catch phrases and popular notions that discourage parents from taking control of their children:

- Children must make their own mistakes.
- If parents take charge, young people will never learn responsibility themselves.
- It's their life.
- Children must be trusted (whether they've earned that trust or not); otherwise, the growth of the inner self will be stunted and creativity and self-expression thwarted.
- Young people have to make their own decisions (therefore, parents shouldn't force their judgement on young people.)
- A child's ego will be harmed if his or her right to total privacy is violated.
- It's intrusive to punish without giving advance warning as to the consequences.

The "Parenting practices" section above is based on the work of Jerome Price (1996: 18, 19).

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Parenting has been stolen from parents

The parental role has become professionalized as parents are pressured to consult experts for advice and direction. Writers, psychologists, social workers and consultants set themselves up as "experts" on child rearing. Freud and Dr. Spock were but two of the "experts" who became famous for telling parents what they should and should not do. A huge and profitable publishing industry flourishes as books and magazines describe the terrible, lifelong impact of poor parenting on our children. Some parents are coerced into buying these books out of a fear of damaging their children forever. This results in parents losing their confidence in their ability to parent and in taking the leadership role in their families. They then lack the confidence necessary to exert reasonable parental authority and consequently some children lack the boundaries they need for their moral and spiritual growth.

Popular culture also exposes children and youth to increasingly violent images. "Attitude" – that is, a stance of being rude, hostile, detached and aggressive – is cool. Without the necessary boundaries, this attitude is sometimes directed at parents.

Most parents and professionals believe that children's basic rights must be recognized and respected. However, most also believe that a balance must exist between young people's rights and their responsibilities; teenagers are responsible for their own actions and behaviour and must be held accountable for their conduct. Although they may strongly resist it, adolescents need leadership from their parents, and the adults in charge of the culture adolescents are living in must be held accountable for the world we have created for them.

[4] The section **"Parenting has been stolen from parents"** is based on the work of Jacqueline Barkley and Anne-Marie Ambert.

Ending the Abuse

There's no easy way to stop teenagers from abusing their parents, but there are some things parents can do to help themselves:

- Parents can shift their thinking from looking for a quick fix to recognition that they are involved in a – sometimes long – process. The solutions rarely come overnight. Stopping parent abuse is a process.
- Parents have to find out what works for them because the dynamics are different in every case. How the abuse is stopped will depend on the individual situation of each family.
- To find out what might work in their case, parents have to try different things.
- Parents can shop around. Therapists and others in the helping professions have different beliefs and different styles.
- Working on the issue, instead of being passive and helpless, gives the parent strength. When they are trying to find a solution, they can feel better about themselves. When the abuse is over – it often diminishes and ends eventually – parents can feel better knowing they have tried a number of ways to find a solution.

Breaking the Silence

To help families and stop parent abuse, we have to break the silence that surrounds it. Because parent abuse is still not recognized, it is often considered acceptable behaviour. The first step to ending the abuse is recognizing that it is abuse.

> *I'm astounded at the number of parents, professionals and school teachers who are referring youth to us because of substance abuse, and when I ask what other behaviour they're exhibiting at home and school they say, "Oh, the usual adolescent behaviour, he or she curses and swears, stomps around, threatens, lots of name calling." It's abusive behaviour and it gets called "usual adolescent behaviour." Even extremely abusive behaviour is now considered acceptable. The women's movement made men's abuse toward women unacceptable, now we have to do the same with adolescent abuse. It may be "normal" but it certainly isn't right or acceptable.*
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Because of a dearth of information about parent abuse, it is not known how often it occurs. There is also a severe lack of resources and supports. Many parents feel that the resources available seem to blame and defeat them rather than offer support. They often suffer abuse in isolation because of the shame and lack of public awareness attached to the issue. Hospitals, shelters and other institutions lack information about the topic and rarely ask the questions that could break through the silence and lead parents to gain support.

> ***I was in the food court at a shopping mall recently, and a teenager at the next table was being verbally abusive to his mother. It was terrible. After they left I looked over at another woman sitting near me and said, "He was being abusive to his mother." And the woman replied, "Oh, I don't think that's abuse." I asked her what she'd call it if her husband did it to her, and she said, "Now that's abuse."***
>
> **(A community worker)**

Until parent abuse is named, it will remain hidden, and families will have difficulty finding help.

Talking About the Abuse

After recognizing the abuse, parents need a safe place to talk about what they are experiencing. Talking about the abuse can have a profound impact on parents and help break the isolation.

> ***The last talk we had turned my life around. Just talking about it out loud made me realize that in our attempt to reach her we'd let her call the shots, we'd let her take over our life. It made me see that we needed to change the relationship between her and us.***
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> **(A parent)**

Parents may want to talk about their experiences with a friend they feel safe with, or with family members. They need someone who will listen and not minimize the abuse. People without appropriate training may have difficulties listening to this topic, especially if they have had similar experiences. It may

therefore be difficult for parents to find an appropriate person to talk to. It is important for them to keep looking until they find a supportive listener. Some places to turn to include:

- Family and friends
- Support groups
- Counselling services
- Parent resource centres
- Women's resource centres
- Shelters for battered women

Contact names and telephone numbers for these resources may be available at local libraries.

Counselling and therapy

When they are dealing with an abusive teen, parents may find a professional counsellor helpful. Every Canadian has the right to publicly funded mental health services for children, adolescents and their families. However, public resources for counselling and therapy are scarce and parents may need to go on a scavenger hunt for publicly funded resources in their area. The local shelter for battered women, the drug dependency service, children's hospital or child welfare service may have trained counsellors whom parents can consult. If these agencies or organizations can't help, they may be able to refer parents elsewhere.

The choice of a therapist or a counsellor is important. Parents need to "shop around" and find a counsellor or therapist who knows how to help. Unfortunately, many parents have negative experiences with counsellors:

> ***Some therapists assume that parents of teenagers who are out of control are insecure or inadequate. They assume that parents who appear passive and overwhelmed have always been troubled and conclude that the parents' symptoms explain why their children are abusing them. When they see people acting passively, they assume that parents are passive by nature. What they don't see is how behavior is shaped by relationships, how parents who seem helpless and inept may have become that way because their resources were slowly exhausted as they tried to cope with impossible situations.***
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Some counsellors say the problem of parent abuse begins with poor parenting practices and a lack of appropriate boundaries and limits. Parents feel this is an unsatisfactory explanation that leaves them feeling powerless and vulnerable at a time when they need support to feel strong and capable.

> ***Family therapists make you feel it's all your fault. We weren't functioning well as a family, we didn't need them to tell us that, and we didn't need them to make us feel we weren't doing our job very well.***
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> **(A parent)**

The relationship between a counsellor or therapist and an abused parent should be collaborative and the therapist should be the parent's ally in the parent's own process. Parents do not always need direction and advice from a counsellor; more often they need support to strengthen themselves in coming up with good solutions to their problems.

It is important that doctors, ministers and other community leaders be informed on this topic and let parents know they are willing to be allies and listeners, and make time for parents.

Support Groups

Support groups can play a significant role in helping parents take concrete steps toward ending the abuse, and thereby take control of their lives. They can provide an opportunity for parents to realize that they are not alone in their struggles, and give parents an opportunity to help others in the same situation. This can be crucial for parents who feel helpless in their own abusive situation because being a source of support for others diminishes the feelings of helplessness.

For a support group to be a successful experience, it has to feel right for the parent, and that often depends on how well the parent "fits" with the other members of the group. The best support groups are often facilitated by a professional who can help parents move on from their anger. Unfortunately, support groups are few and far between and receive little or no support, financial or otherwise, from governments or professionals. More effort needs to be put into creating effective support groups for parents.

Mediation

Mediating between abusive teens and their parents is controversial, but it may be a source of help in resolving the abusive situation. There is a place for mediation and circle healing, but it has to be in the hands of someone who knows that the victim is not responsible for the violence. The abusive teen has to be accountable for the abuse.

> *I think we have to look carefully at what the therapeutic community is doing in cases of adolescent abuse of parents. Mediation with teens and their parents in this context is a dangerous practice. Mediation is for parties who are equals. An adolescent is not his or her parent's equal. Before there can be any discussion or negotiation, the perpetrator must take responsibility for the abuse. The first intervention step is for everyone to acknowledge that the abuse is happening – the professionals, the parents and the adolescents. The goal of any discussion with parents and adolescents is not to create equality but to establish reasonable parental authority. The abuse can't be mediated.*
>
> (Jacqueline Barkley)

Working Together

When parents work together as a couple, they feel much stronger. The situation is made far worse when couples side with the child against each other.

> *Her father and her would sit and whisper, I was the ogre, I was the one keeping her from doing what she wanted. They'd plan how they were going to get me to let her do things.*
>
> (A parent)

Uniting with other people who are in the child's life can give parents strength and more control. Parents have the right to stay in close communication with people who are a part of their child's life, such as parents of the child's friends, teachers, principals and guidance counsellors, doctors, church leaders, police and probation officers. This is not "interfering."

Shifting the Focus

Once parents recognize they are being abused, they can begin to emotionally separate from their children and shift the focus to their own needs.

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>
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Keeping Informed About Parent Abuse and Related Issues

Understanding what is happening can help parents make better informed decisions. Parents may find it useful to familiarize themselves with resources available in their community, legal issues, mental health and drug abuse issues, and other topics related to parent abuse. Reading about parent abuse also helps some parents:

> *I found it (Parent Abuse leaflet) quite amazing to read because it was describing accurately what was happening to me and I hadn't seen that described anywhere else.*
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> (A parent)

Trying to deal with the problem of abuse may not be possible until the drug or alcohol abuse is addressed. Parents can educate themselves about drugs and the consequences of teens' use of drugs. Jerome Price suggests that parents and therapists may find it useful to contact a local adolescent drug treatment centre prior to dealing with a teen's problem themselves.

Many parents in abusive situations feel they are going crazy. Being able to read about parent abuse helps them to recognize that what they are experiencing is abuse and enables them to take action.

> *It helps parents realize they are being abused, that they are normal and aren't going crazy and they can look for help. For a while I thought I was going nuts.*
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Setting Limits

Setting limits can be a difficult and complex process, often requiring different forms of interventions for different children. To begin dealing with the long-term issues associated with the abuse, parents need time and space to:

- begin taking control of their life
- assert their right for safety and the safety of their other children
- start to heal the relationship with the abusive child if possible

For some families, removal of the teenager from the home, sometimes for a few hours or a week, will help the situation. Removal of the teen is a means of escaping the immediate threat of abuse and can also give parents the time and space to begin dealing with the long-term issues associated with the abuse. Unfortunately, for some parents removal of the teen on a more permanent basis is the only solution for ending the abuse.

Respite care in the form of short-term supervision of the teen by someone other than the parent could be beneficial in that it gives parents a break from the stress of the situation. However, some parents can focus their energy only on removing the child from the home and not on finding alternative living arrangements. Either way, when parents make the decision to remove their abusive child from the home, they need support.

Involving the Police

It may be necessary to involve the police to maintain safety in the home. It is important that parents are clear about what the criminal justice system can and cannot do so they have realistic expectations of the system and can access available supports.

The criminal justice system functions with clear parameters. It is mandated to respond to criminal behaviour, and while some forms of parent abuse are at times difficult for parents to live with, they do not necessarily constitute an offence under the *Criminal Code.* Physical abuse, threats, theft and damage to property are criminal offences. However, few police forces have protocols for dealing with parent abuse.

Police involvement sometimes encourages children to understand the severity of their behaviour:

> ***The officer struck a perfect balance between being disapproving and strict and being compassionate, but not overly so. He confronted her in front of me for over an hour, and outlined the consequences of what would happen if this didn't stop, that she was violating my essential rights as a human being. They told her she would be taken to the police station and charged with assault or with disrupting the peace, and that she could be placed in a group home. Although that didn't end the abuse, it stopped the escalation. I would move to the phone and she'd calm down a bit. I think that's what kept her from actually hitting me. The third time they were there in 10 minutes. I felt that I was in danger. The most helpful thing they did was take it seriously. They presented it as a very serious thing and she took it seriously.***
>
> **(A parent)**

The job of the police is to deal with the immediate emergency, and they should not be expected to provide long-term solutions. However, calling the police may be part of an overall plan developed by the parents, the police and other service providers, to end the abuse.

> ***Immediately, you can get help from the police. One officer made it clear to me that although I could call if I was in danger, they can't keep showing up every day and simply calling the police was no solution. I needed to be addressing the roots of what was happening.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Many parents are afraid to call the police because they feel guilty when their children are charged with assault. They also feel that court orders to attend school or stay at home and follow the rules are seldom supervised or enforced, and that probation officers are overworked and cannot properly supervise the children under their care.

I had her charged. She got eight months' probation and community service, and she had certain restrictions and conditions like she had to go to school and she wasn't to hit me. She violated every condition of her probation and they did nothing. I told the probation officer she hit me. I got involved with the justice system only because I wanted her forced to go into therapy. I didn't want her charged. I wanted her in therapy. The police and the prosecutor said, "Charge her, it's the best way to get her into therapy." Here we are, six months later, and still no therapy. They lied to me.

(A parent)

Others are afraid to call the police because they have attempted to restrain their children and fear they may be charged with assault. Some teens erroneously believe they are protected from their parents' authority by law, and parents live with the threat of being charged with assault, abuse or neglect if they attempt to discipline their teen. Common controlling comments are "You can't touch me!" "You have to support me until I'm 18." "I'll call Children's Aid on you!" and "I'll call the police!" Jerome Price (1996) calls these threats "the hammer of the 90s." These youths were misinformed, but unfortunately their parents believed them:

She likes to say that we can't touch her – physically – and also seems to know that the justice system can't touch her. She'll say things like, "If I get caught they can't do anything with me. They can't prosecute you until you're 16."

(A parent)

What parents need to know is that they have the right – in fact, the responsibility – to control their children. Obviously, parents should not neglect or use violent means to control their children. When a child threatens to call the authorities, parents should be willing to call the child's bluff and say, "Do."

Some parents regret involving the criminal justice system because they found it even more difficult to live with the child after assault charges were laid. Others state that they felt less in control and more vulnerable when the police and the court system were involved. Parents of other racial origins or gay parents and lower income families may be afraid to seek help from agencies such as the police for fear the child will be subjected to racism, homophobia or some other form of discrimination.

Police involvement sometimes encourages children to understand the severity of their behaviour:

> *The officer struck a perfect balance between being disapproving and strict and being compassionate, but not overly so. He confronted her in front of me for over an hour, and outlined the consequences of what would happen if this didn't stop, that she was violating my essential rights as a human being. They told her she would be taken to the police station and charged with assault or with disrupting the peace, and that she could be placed in a group home. Although that didn't end the abuse, it stopped the escalation. I would move to the phone and she'd calm down a bit. I think that's what kept her from actually hitting me. The third time they were there in 10 minutes. I felt that I was in danger. The most helpful thing they did was take it seriously. They presented it as a very serious thing and she took it seriously.*
>
> **(A parent)**

The job of the police is to deal with the immediate emergency, and they should not be expected to provide long-term solutions. However, calling the police may be part of an overall plan developed by the parents, the police and other service providers, to end the abuse.

> *Immediately, you can get help from the police. One officer made it clear to me that although I could call if I was in danger, they can't keep showing up every day and simply calling the police was no solution. I needed to be addressing the roots of what was happening.*
>
> **(A parent)**

Many parents are afraid to call the police because they feel guilty when their children are charged with assault. They also feel that court orders to attend school or stay at home and follow the rules are seldom supervised or enforced, and that probation officers are overworked and cannot properly supervise the children under their care.

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The Ultimate Goal: Regaining Control and Healing the Relationship

Regaining control begins with naming the problem and then taking the necessary steps, which usually involve talking to someone and accessing counselling, and sometimes the removal of the child from the home. Immediately after this, it is normal for the parent to experience a variety of emotions. Some parents experience relief, while others are angry or depressed, and feel a sense of failure and loss. It is important that they accept their feelings and be gentle with themselves. Some parents gain inner strength through exercise, meditation or support groups. This helps build their sense of self-worth and that in turn strengthens their ability to cope with the situation. Even little things like pouring their feelings into a journal can help parents become stronger.

Sometimes the child's attitude shows improvement, and, if the child has left the home, she or he may want to return. Decision making at this time should not be made out of the parents' feelings of guilt. It is important that the parents think through what they want so that they can retain their newly found control. They need to be very clear about what the rules and the consequences for breaking the rules are, and they need to rigidly enforce the consequences.

Parents may want to have the child sign a written list of rules such as this one:

I agree to do the following:

- Attend and fully engage in school
- Keep parents informed about where I am
- Do chores (e.g. clean up my room).

In our house we will always treat each other with respect. This means no physical or verbal abuse. These things are forbidden in our house:

- Name calling
- Hitting, punching, slapping or kicking
- Damaging other people's property
- Making threats to hurt myself or anyone else
- Stealing or borrowing things without permission
- Playing mind games
- Insisting others buy things they can't afford

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Adolescents are likely to make excuses for their abusive behaviour or make empty or dismissive responses. Parents should recognize these as nothing more than attempts to avoid responsibility. Parents should not accept these excuses and should carry out the established consequences for breaking the rules. Some common empty phrases teens use are:

- Everybody does it.
- It's not like you haven't done it before.
- I'll never do it again.
- It's all your fault.
- I won't lie to you.
- Can I go now? Are you finished?
- It's my life. I can do what I want.
- I'm sorry.

Parents should choose the consequences appropriate for each rule violation. The following are some possible consequences:

- Take away the use of the car, phone, stereo, etc.
- Contact the school daily to meet with teachers.
- Take away child's allowance or spending money.

Parents should ensure that they have support in place to help them stay in control to carry through with enforcing rules and consequences.

Healing and relationship building can continue at the pace the parents are comfortable with. The ongoing healing includes working through the anger and coming to a place of acceptance.

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Help for the Abusive Youth

To stop parent abuse, the teens themselves must recognize that their behaviour is abusive. Some teens find it useful to talk to an adult other than their parents, and others may find it helpful to talk to their peers. Many of the supports for parents can also be a source of help to the youth. These include:

- counselling and support groups
- family friend or relative
- outreach workers at battered women's shelters.

> ***I was in therapy for years, but I didn't really change until my friend said what I was doing was wrong.***
>
> **(An adolescent)**

Reading materials can also help teens to realize that their behaviours are abusive.

> ***I sat down with my daughter and we read the entire booklet through together. It helped because we went through her behaviours using the categories and descriptions and she was able to label them. I would say, "You did this, what would you say that is?" and she would say, "That's financial abuse." Or whatever it was. Since then she has been able to identify her own behaviour as abusive, and after we went through the material she started asking if there were groups that would help her.***
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Final Note

The Limits of Publicly Funded Services

Many parents report having difficulty finding appropriate support and express frustration at what they perceive as severely limited resources.

> *I called everyone in the phone book that I thought could have helped. I exhausted every avenue I could think of exhausting. There's a considerable lack of resources for parents of children this age. They are very, very under-serviced.*
>
> (A parent)

Parents complain that the response time for assistance is far too long. When they finally reach out for help, parents are often desperate and in situations that require immediate attention. Limited, overburdened resources mean long waiting periods before help is available. In addition, agencies have specific criteria that exclude many families.

Even where these services are available, they are not always accessible. Sometimes, lack of transportation and child care is a barrier. Parents are not always able to leave the child unsupervised.

Parents also find that some of the assistance they are offered creates more problems for the family. For example, some teens receiving social assistance, in group homes or foster homes, have more freedom and financial support than their parents can provide. When these lifestyles are experienced by the teens as being more favourable than living with the rules and limitations at home, conflicts increase between the parents and teens and some adolescents begin to use the system to their advantage.

> *It was also confusing for the other children. She would flaunt the new clothes she bought with her Children's Aid allowance in front of them. It really bothered me. She was getting all these things I couldn't afford for my other kids because she could play the system.*
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Working with Institutions

Hints for dealing with institutions

Consider yourself the manager of your child's care. Don't depend on anyone else to do this for you.

> ***I think we're going to have to be very watchful and assertive to get whatever help is available. It doesn't just come to you. A lot depends on what you reach out for. You have to be a discernible person to be able to access what's out there. You can fall through the cracks pretty easily.***
>
> **(A parent)**

Keep a record of your child's behaviours, moods and encounters with the legal and mental health system, and of your child's medications, dosages and clinical appointments. Note your own conversations with school officials, specialists and other involved parties and record names, dates and telephone numbers.

Keep in mind that professionals are working for you. Respect their position and expertise, but don't assume they always know best.

Pay attention to your inner voice and assert yourself when you think it is necessary. The final decision is always yours.

Do your best to ensure that your child does not fall between the cracks. It may mean making phone calls and personal visits; it may mean telling the workers that you won't take no for an answer.

Find yourself a friend who can be your support person. Feel free to bring this support pal when you see school teachers, psychiatrists, etc.

It helps to talk it through. Tell a friend or family member what you are experiencing in your dealings with institutions.

The above is adapted with kind permission of Mason, Paul and Randi Kreger. *Stop Walking On Eggshells*. Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger Publications, 1998.

Community Awareness

Educating people to recognize and name abuse is essential to stopping parent abuse.

> *It's a very, very touchy subject. Recently a woman said, "Don't talk so foolish," when I suggested she was being abused by her son. They don't always recognize that it's not okay, they don't have to put up with it, so they can't stop it.*
>
> (A parent)

At the time parents are experiencing abuse, they may not have the time, energy or desire to organize others. When they are in crisis, community awareness is not their primary concern. After moving out of the crises, some parents may not wish to talk about their experiences publicly. However, parents may wish to join with other concerned people to promote community awareness. Some of the things parents can do to oppose parent abuse are:

- Discuss the issue with friends and family.
- Persuade a local organization (such as a church or community centre) to offer support groups.
- Start a group for teens.
- Distribute materials or offer to talk to groups and organizations in the community such as churches, parent resource centres and women's shelters.
- Encourage schools to have children do projects on the topic and ask teachers to address the issue of parent abuse in the classroom.

> *Groups for young people, encouraging them to have fun in a group. That would be a better sense of community.*
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> *I used (the Parent Abuse material), incorporated it into the program I do in schools, and I used it with youth groups, for educating youth.*
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Professionals can distribute materials such as this booklet.

> ***I ordered it for a client in victim services who had gone to the police with a complaint against her daughter for physical assault. I liked that we were encouraged to photocopy it and distribute it to others. My colleagues were intrigued. This was fabulous for people in child welfare. I have been passing it on to clients as a front-line worker and with other people working in the same area.***
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> (A counsellor)

Community action requires organization and hard work.

> ***In our community they go so far and that's it. We try to get a youth group going, but it's so hard. We need a facilitator, an outreach worker to work with us and get it established so people who work and are dealing with the problem don't have to take it on. If the government doesn't think about these small little things it will be the worse for us all because this is our future, this is tomorrow.***
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Organize a One-Day Workshop

In most communities, the issue of parent abuse is rarely discussed in public. A one-day workshop could help to bring the issue out into the open. Parents or others who are concerned about the issue of parent abuse could encourage an existing organization or a group to help pull together a committee of people who will design and organize the workshop. Police officers, social workers, therapists, community health nurses and legal aid workers may be interested in getting together to talk about the topic. Often, when people begin to pool their experiences, they find that collectively they have a great deal of knowledge about the topic. Some questions that could be discussed at the workshop are:

What is parent abuse and who are the perpetrators and the victims?

- Who is most at risk (mothers, fathers, single parents) and why?
- Does abuse by boys and girls differ in form or frequency?
- At what ages does the abuse start?
- How prevalent is this problem?
- What forms does the violence take?

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What causes the abuse?

- Is there a connection between parent abuse and other forms of abuse?
- Has the teen witnessed violence in the family?
- Is there a link between this form of violence and violence in the culture?

How do families cope?

- Where do parents and teens turn for help?
- What kind of help do they receive?
- What strategies have victimized parents found helpful?
- What resources and tools do parents and counsellors need?
- How can the abuse be prevented or lessened?

What responsibility is taken by professionals?

- What is the attitude of professionals toward this issue?
- Who is addressing the issue?
- How can they better address this issue?

The following are sessions which worked successfully at a conference held in Halifax in 1996:

Morning Sessions

Welcome and Introductions

Panel Presentation:

A parent and two therapists gave 10-minute talks and answered questions from participants.

Small Group Discussion:

- Is the abuse of parents by their teenage children an issue in our community?
- Is there more violence toward parents now than in the past?
- Why is this happening?
- After the group discussions, brief reports were shared.

Afternoon Sessions

Panel Presentation:

Representatives from local counselling agencies, the shelter for battered women, and the police gave 10-minute talks and answered questions from participants.

Small Group Discussion:

- Why don't people talk about this issue?
- How can we make it a public issue?
- A skit dramatizing a variety of forms of parent abuse and the effect on the parent was performed by a parents' group.

Closure:

Invite participants to share one thing they will take away from the day.

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